

ACFW Online Class "Planning a Book"
Roxanne Rustand
February, 2010

LESSON #2

In the last lesson, I talked about how writers first approach a story: a general plot idea, a vision of a great crisis situation or climax, an intriguing character, or setting are a few of the most common starting points.

In this lesson, I'd like to continue on the subject of characters. It's certainly an important topic, because a story with flat, boring characters, or a story with characters who simply have nothing significant to overcome, is going to bore a reader--whether it be a contest judge, an editor, or someone who flips through your book in Wal-Mart, and then puts it back on the shelf.

CONFLICT can come in many complex and varied forms, but ultimately distill into that familiar summary: "Man vs. man, man vs himself, or man vs nature"

Characters who have natural and believable conflict with each other (including subplot characters amongst themselves and also in their relationship with the heroine and hero) will help drive your plot, along with the external conflict (circumstances) and internal conflicts (old, internal wounds that block the hero or heroine from achieving their most important goals.) But where, oh where does one begin?

Last time, I mentioned some great reference books on personality typing and archetypes. Two of my favorites are TYPE TALK by Otto Kroeger and Janet Thuesen, and THE COMPLETE WRITER'S GUIDE TO HEROES & HEROINES, by Cowden, Vidars and LaFever.

References like these can help you select a personality type for a character, and make him believable. They are also helpful for selecting character to be in opposition with your character.

ANOTHER WONDERFUL TOOL FOR DEVELOPING STRONG CONFLICTS IS THE CONFLICT GRID.

Kathy Lloyd Jacobson first introduced this concept back in the early '90's, when she wrote an excellent monthly newsletter on the art of writing a novel. My friend Lyn Cote and I both dabbled with the Grid back then, but I didn't fully realize the value of it and drifted away. Lyn continued to use it and later reintroduced it to me. This time around, I readjusted some of the terminology and descriptions so it could work better with the way I think, and now I love it! I can't add attachments to this loop, so I have

put a PDF copy of my version up on my website at www.roxannerustand.com in the "Articles" section. See what you think!

This tool helps you develop many-layered conflicts. The key is the narrow column that says "versus" between the hero and heroine columns...and then to look at each category, row by row. The more rows you can fill in, with plausible details about the hero and heroine that are in conflict, the richer and deeper your story can be.

Ms. Jacobson gave me permission to use this tool in workshops, but there's much, much more in her book "The Novel Approach," a wonderful 220 page reference on writing available via download at <http://www.kathyjacobson.com>. It's worth every penny of its price, and more! I highly recommend it. Even though I'd subscribed to her newsletter years ago, I bought this updated book recently and it has a place on my keeper shelf.

By the way, Lyn Cote gives an entire online workshop on the Conflict Grid, and I recommend it, too. There is information on her schedule at her website, www.booksbylyncote.com.

WHAT ABOUT SORTING OUT CONFLICTS BETWEEN CHARACTERS BESIDES THE HERO AND HEROINE?

I don't have a handout to post for the following idea, but you can easily make a little chart on your computer or in a notebook with a list of your characters, and who has conflicts with whom. Not all these have to be major, of course, but the more levels of conflict you have between all of your characters, the more interest and excitement you have.

Characters who play well together and who are happy do not make for an interesting read!

Weave those secondary character conflicts through your story, using them to contrast, parallel, or contribute to the progress of the central story line, to create a stronger, more compelling read. An example is *SUTTER'S CROSS*, a novel by W. Dale Cramer. It's a great read, with a complex interweaving of subplots. A good exercise would be to list the characters in this story (or a book by one of your favorite authors), list each character's initial goal, motivation and conflict, and then chart how these characters are interwoven with each other for a cohesive and page-turning read.

HOW DO YOU KEEP PEOPLE AND PLACE DETAILS STRAIGHT AS YOU WRITE A BOOK?

CHARACTER FILE:

Open a file, label it "Characters" and keep it in a computer file with the other plotting documents you have for each story-in-progress. If you mention someone has blue eyes and blond hair, drives a Jeep or broke his left ankle, write it down. Keep adding to this list throughout the writing of your book.

If you plan to write a series, keep this file and add to it as you write the following books. It will save you endless hours of trying to hunt down whether or not Sarah broke her left arm or her right, or if the name of Aunt Mary's dog is Buffy or Sam.

I put one of my Character Files up on my website (under "articles".) It is there unadorned, my working copy, not spell-checked or reviewed for grammar. It shows the details for my 9/09 book, Final Exposure, though I erased the details for the books that are out right now and in June. On the second page, you'll see a computer generated map with some setting details and distances.

I can't tell you how helpful this all is, when writing a series of connected books, so one can correctly refers to distances, directions, and character details that a reader might recall from the previous book. Readers are smart!

TIME LINE:

This tool is also really helpful, to ensure that you keep past time frames constant. If a character thinks about how "everything went downhill after his partner's embezzlement was discovered last December" and you'd referred to it as July earlier, an editor is going to notice, and it can be really hard to sort these things out (or even find all of the pertinent references) and correct them.

And if both of you fail to correct all the errors (an easy thing to do, because some little references might not pop up in a word search---say, if you were searching for the word "divorce" and had forgotten that a character had once referred to it as when the neighbor's marriage "fell apart.") You can bet that if an error slips through, a reader will find them and send you a letter, with specific page numbers!

Here's a quick example of a time line, in case you are wondering what I mean:

BOOK #1 (runs Oct-Dec)

3/4/03: Max born

3/15/09: Allan killed in wreck

4/1/09: Jack gets custody of Max.

4/09-9/09: Jack overwhelmed with helping Max adjust, and settling estate

7/09: embezzlement at Jack's investment firm is discovered when Ted disappears.

7/09-10/09: Lots of headlines, angry investors. FBI and cops are searching, investigation is ongoing. Jack is reeling, fending off reporters, sheltering Max. Jack is increasingly suspicious that the car wreck was related to Ted's disappearance. Did Ted sabotage the car, intending to kill Jack and frame him for the embezzlement?

9/28/09: Erin Cole arrives in Montana to take over grandfather's store, home, and rental house.

10/1/09: Jack and Max Peters arrive at Erin's rental house

10/2/09: The present day story begins, Chapter 1

This is just a quick example. I actually figure out birth dates for everyone, and if need be, when the hero and heroine finished college, and so on. I only add dates if and when there needs to be a reference in the story, but then I can always check back and stay consistent if that time frame ever needs to be mentioned again later.

Onward to Lesson #3!

Roxanne Rustand

www.roxannerustand.com

<http://roxannerustand.blogspot.com> *"The All Creatures Great and Small Place"*